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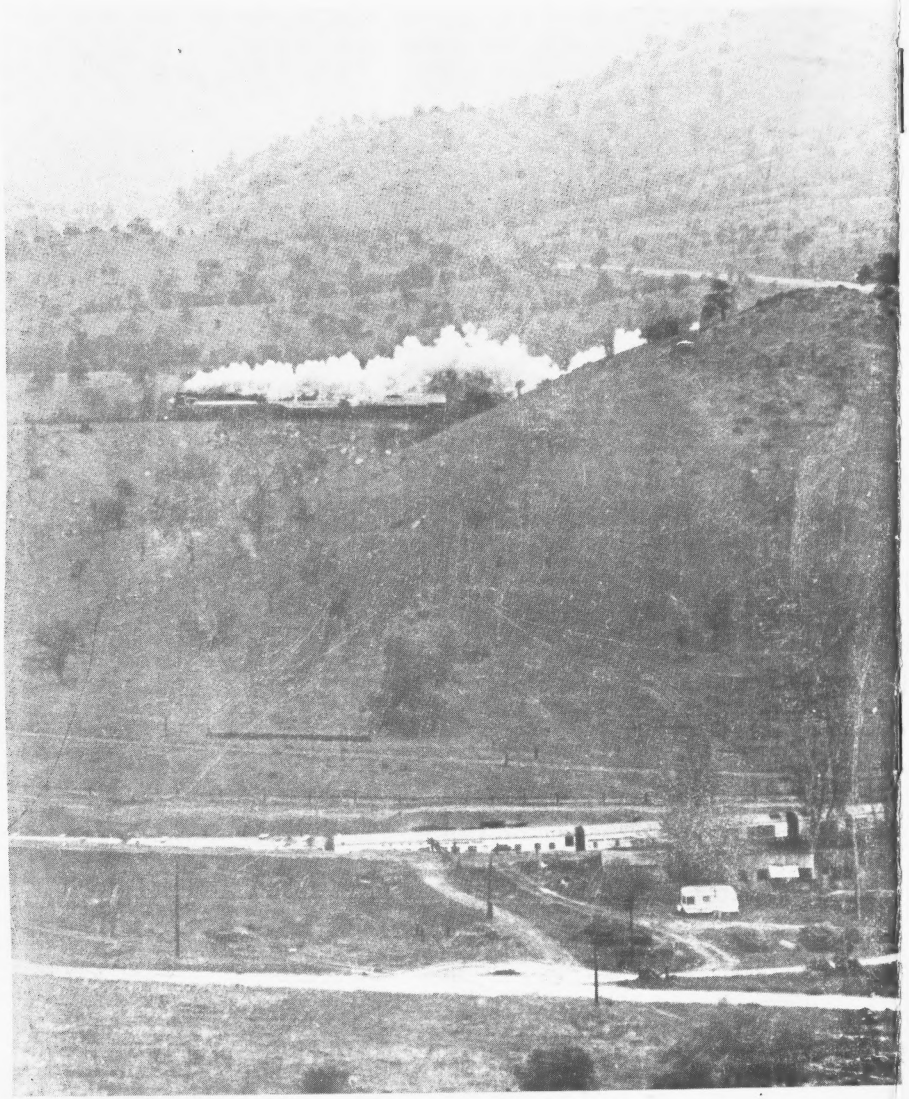

RAIL TRAVEL NEWS

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VOL.6 NO. 2
SECOND ISSUE OF
JANUARY 1976
#124

RTN Rides auto-train

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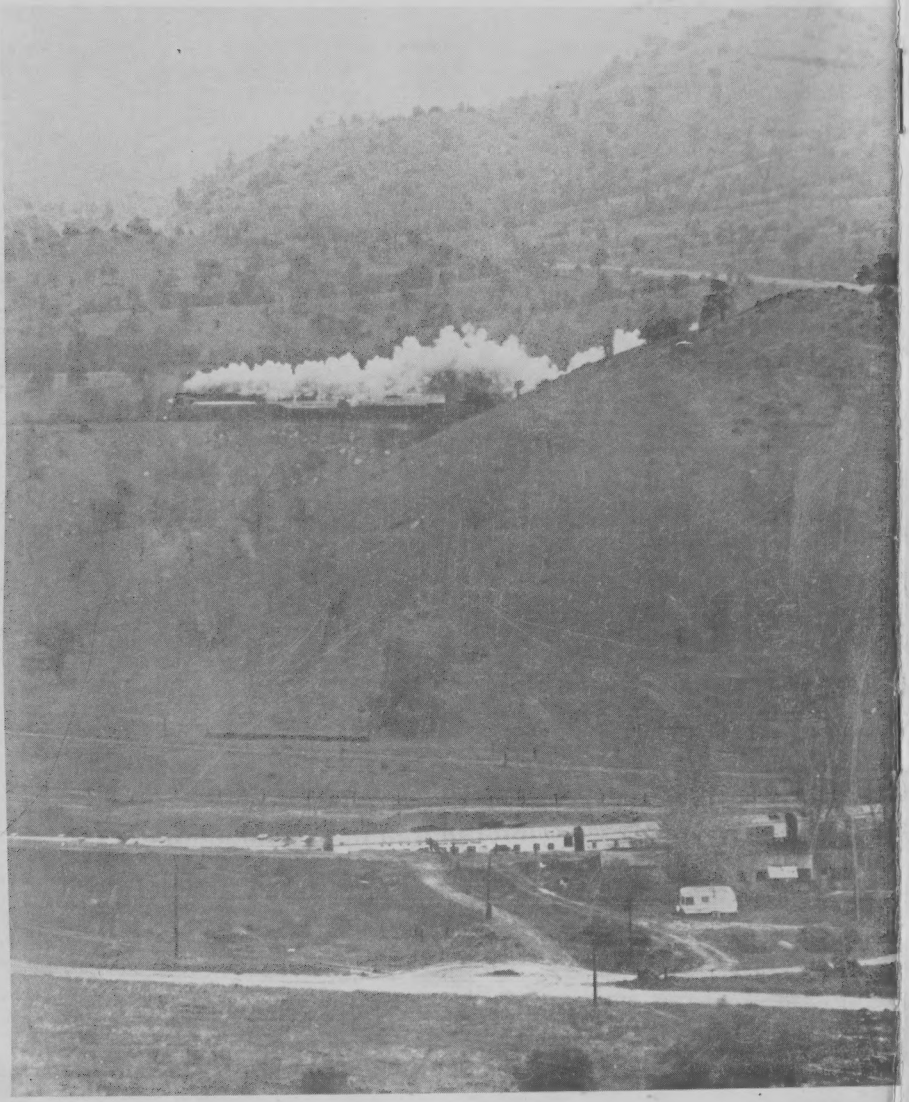

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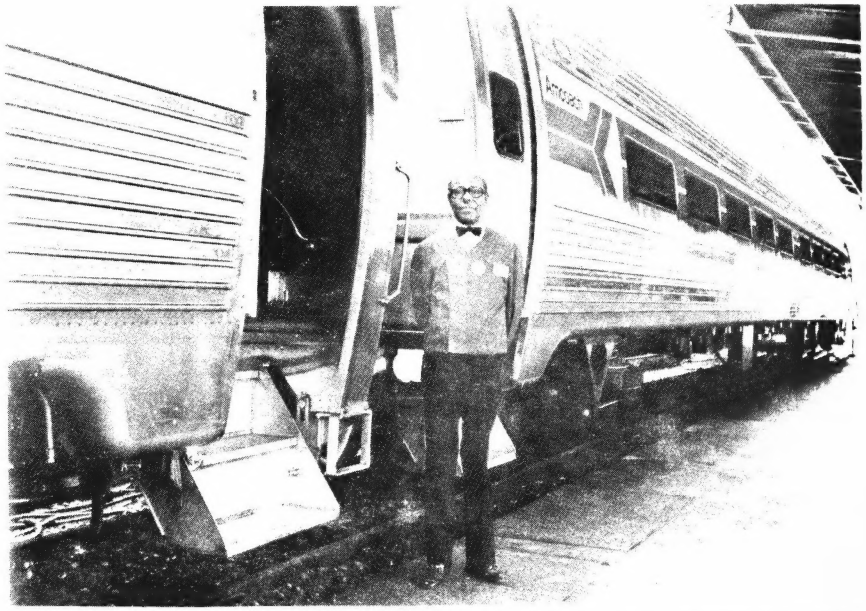

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Copyright c 1976 by Message Media. Published twice monthly by Message Media, P.O. Box 9007, Berkeley CA 94709. Subscription $9.00 per year; [illegible]. STAFF: James Russell, Editor; [illegible], Editor-at-Large. Regional correspondents: Peter Putnam Bretz, Malibu; [illegible] Terry, Chicago; Kenneth Maylath, Baltimore; Peter Roehm, Boston. Artist: Nick Stern. Mailing date this issue: Feb.4, 1976.

ON THE COVER

This issue we deviate a bit from our usual format, and present a long, major feature on Auto-Train, the first time we've covered it in such detail. We felt we've been slighting the train that RTN readers rated the best in North America, so starting on page 5 we print in its entirety Peter Bretz's narrative of his investigation of A-T operations aboard the Virginia-Florida train. The cover photo is from a color slide provided courtesy of Auto-Train, which pictures the whole passenger service crew of one train posing on A-T's engine #4000. (Auto-Train is a registered trademark of Auto-Train Corp., 1801 K St. N.W., Washington DC 20006.)

REAR COVER: Berkeley photographer Carter Roberts went to great pains to obtain this possibly unique photo of the Freedom Train climbing the Tehachapi Loop in Southern California on Dec 22. We had to crop the photo, so it may not be obvious to all that a rear portion of the train appears in the foreground of the picture. The steam engine, at work on the front, is within perhaps 1000 feet of crossing over the tunnel that the train's tail has just passed thru.

AMFLEET EQUIPMENT AND A MAJOR NORTHEAST CHANGEOVER

Amtrak this month released the two publicity photos at left which picture the new Amfleet equipment being phased into Colonial Corridor operations. Above are shown arrangements for meals at your seat with folddown trays. The picture below, which might be entitled "Where's the stepbox?", is an exterior view of the new Amcoaches.

Amtrak early in February released details of the big Feb 15 schedule changeover, at which time the corporation will have reached the halfway point in conversion from conventional train to Amfleet equipment. Amtrak calls it the official start of regular Amfleet service in the Northeast. With the Feb 15 and succeeding timetables, Amtrak will indicate which trains bear the new equipment. Commencing that date, the following southbound trains will be Amfleeted: (Phila.-DC thru trains) 8am #169; 2pm #177; 4:20pm #179 (MERCHANTS LTD); and the 6pm Boston-Phila. (#183?) to be named the BICENTENNIAL. Northbound: (DC-Phila.) 7:15am #168; 7:05am #170; 1:05pm #176; 4:05pm #178. These will all carry Amclub cars; the following Amfleet trains will not: #164 DC-NY 7:05pm; #165 NY-DC 8am. President Reistrup called the new vehicles "showpiece trains," of which 140 cars will be on hand by Feb 15, coming at the rate of one car per working day. Ten Amfleet trains will now serve Philadelphia, Amtrak pointed out.

The new schedules result in the following arrangement of service in the Corridor: Boston-DC thru trains, 12 daily and 13 Saturday; Boston-Phila., 2 daily; Boston-NY, 18 weekdays and a new Providence-NY TurboTrain run; NY-DC, 20 conventional trains weekdays; NY-DC, 26 Metroliners Mon-Thur, 30 Fri, 16 Sat, 24 Sun. The introduction of the new equipment results in fewer runs handling more passengers, because of the higher-density seating. Metroliners will run in longer consists (to 6 cars) in peak periods. Amtrak said these new patterns will maximize equipment use and also permit better maintenance scheduling.

Minimum normal Amfleet consists will be patterned as follows: (A) Amclub, 1-3 Amcoaches; (B) Amcafe, 1-4 Amcoaches; (C) Amclub, Amcafe, to 7 Amcoaches; (D) 2 Amcafes, to 8 Amcoaches. Under the new schedules, Metroliners will depart Washington hourly from 6am to 6pm, with 7 and 8pm departures added on Fri and Sun. Besides these DC departures, an Amfleet train at 7:05pm, a conventional train at 8:05pm, and the NIGHT OWL at 10:30pm will fill in the northbound schedule. From New York south, Metroliners will leave on a clocker schedule from 6:30am to 6:30pm, with 7:30pm and 8:30pm added Fri and Sun; and in addition, 7 and 9pm Amfleet trains. Effective on Feb 16, the last Metroliner on Sat will leave DC at 5pm, and the last will leave NY at 5:30pm. On Sunday, Metroliners will run from DC-NY at 7 and 8pm.

To promote more off-peak Corridor travel, Amtrak announced late in January a 25% reduction excursion fare to take effect Feb 15. The fare, for all trains except Metroliners, is good for trips starting at any time except between noon and 6pm on Fri and Sun, and the roundtrip must be completed within 30 days. It is invalid on certain short Corridor hops (NY-Trenton, Phila-Trenton, Phila-Wilmington). Children are eligible for half-fare excursion rates. In some cases, Amtrak's Bicentennial special fare is lower than the new excursion rate.

page 3

WHITE HOUSE BUDGET THREATENS 19 AMTRAK ROUTES

The White House released its budget on Jan 21 for the fiscal year starting next Oct 1, and funds for Amtrak contained in it are estimated to be $62 million short of the rail corporation's needs that year. The White House, which has been trying to cut back rail service to a bare-bones system, mostly centered in the Northeast, since Amtrak was first planned, is attempting once more to starve rail service out. Upon release of the budget figures, Amtrak President Reistrup released a letter sent a month earlier to DOT Secretary Coleman protesting the action. Reistrup said it would be necessary to drop 19 or 20 routes with the cut in support that is planned. These trains facing possible demise are: the NORTH COAST HIAWATHA, BLUE RIDGE, LONE STAR, FLORIDIAN, SAN FRANCISCO ZEPHYR, JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY, MOUNTAINEER, LAKE SHORE LIMITED, MONTREALER, INTER-AMERICAN, NATIONAL LIMITED, SAN JOAQUIN, PACIFIC INTERNATIONAL, SAN DIEGANS, SHAWNEE, and the Seattle-Portland, Chicago-Detroit, Chicago-St. Louis, New Haven-Springfield, and Chicago-Milwaukee trains. In addition, Amtrak would have to cancel the planned Washington-Denver service and several planned 403-B services. These cuts are based on the DOT's recommendations to Amtrak that it drop the routes with the largest deficits per passenger mile. (See QUOTES, p. 18, for one newspaper's massive typo on this topic.)

While no one expects that these cuts will actually be made, it is clear that it is once again necessary for rail supporters to show strong support to their elected legislators in order for Congress to rally the votes to override President Ford's budgetary restrictions. Observers are noting that even if most of the threatened routes are retained, a tight budget at this critical point would severely delay the necessary rebuilding of the nation's rail passenger system that is just getting underway. One Western Senator's remark overheard in Washington: "Jerry's not going to get away with this one!"

Rail Canada

THE BIG PASSENGER TRAIN PLAN IS RELEASED - LEGISLATORS EXPRESS STUNNED DISMAY

The long-awaited Jan 29 statement by Minister of Transport Otto Lang, laying out the federal government's plan for dealing with the passenger train problem in Canada came as a shock to a number of protesting legislators. Basically the plan foresees a reduction in transcontinental service to one route instead of two, with the Canadian Pacific line being followed between Vancouver and Sudbury, then the Canadian National from Sudbury to Montreal and Toronto. A single route into Atlantic Canada is sought, rather than the present three. The Quebec-Windsor "corridor" would be developed. Some rail routes would be abandoned for bus service. Rail routes to remote areas would be retained if there is no suitable substitute. These changes would be wrought by the private railroads themselves, with subsidy for deficits being raised from 80% to 100% by Ottawa.

The Transport Minister is directing the Canadian Transport Commission (not known in the past as a friend of the passenger train) to hold hearings on rail service in Canada to determine the details of these changes. He said that Transport Canada (the Ministry of Transport) will itself also consult with railroads, labour, the provinces and others concerning their areas of interest in this matter.

Lang said that he now expects the railways to "make management decisions to improve services." He added, "We also see these carriers making joint use of terminals and reservation systems, making schedules more sensitive to the regional markets, developing systems to change holiday and weekend demand so that most of the carriers' equipment is used on a continuing basis rather than on the few peak days per year, co-ordinating schedules between air, bus and rail to remove long stopovers, developing the demonstration project to evaluate advanced rail technology, furthering research in necessary roadbed improvements, and embarking on innovative passenger service marketing." In the barrage of criticism that greeted his plan (which we will cover further in our next issue) one particular point of concern was the loss of passenger service to Edmonton, Canada's fifth largest city.

RTN Rides auto-train

BY PETER PUTNAM BRETZ

At once, the prospect of riding Auto-Train forces the big question: Is it the best train in the country? And not only that, but can this writer give an unbiased report on the operation? After all, I am going as the guest of Auto-Train, and (as it turned out) am to be treated in the royal manner. Could I, after enjoying a free meal, report on it objectively? What about the late H. L. Mencken who made it a point never to accept free passes?

With this churning thru my mind, I stepped off a Metroliner in Washington DC and was met outside by Mr. R.J. Church with his little yellow Saab. "Call me Rich, Pete." He's the public relations man at A-T and was driving me over to Lorton to get the train. The whole way, he's the typical PR man, bubbling over with choice words, enthusiasm, and grand plans. As we struggle thru traffic, he informs me of Auto-Train's plan for "Truck-Train" between Fredericksburg and Lake City, Florida, at a cost that truckers would use, but more spartan than the present setup. Also, he told me about "Auto-Train de Mexico" from Nuevo Laredo to Quaretero. That train would be run by Mexicans under complete franchise; they supplying the equipment and personnel, A-T giving the knowhow.

Rich Church brings the Saab to a stop at his home in Alexandria and goes in for a minute. I reflect that Auto-Train cannot carry anyone who doesn't have a car along unless, as in my case, they are guests of an A-T official who's also along. Today is October 28, and the press run of the LAKE SHORE LIMITED was just getting under way in Chicago. But I chose to be here instead.

Driving the rest of the 18 miles to Lorton, Rich mentioned the recent fare increase to $225.00 for two people and car, saying that advance reservations were still coming in at the same rate, and that the increase hadn't affected loadings so far. Yes, the sleepers sell far in advance. "You see, Pete," he was saying, "these folks are Florida people, not regular travelers. That is, they come down and stay a season. Some have ridden with us quite a few times, however. Mostly these are older, traditional train riders. At first, when we started, it was thought mostly young people would be our customers, but it just didn't work out that way. These folks are part of the less than 2% of the traveling public that would normally go by train." Mr. Church hands me a packet of promotional mat ial and press releases, which I thumb thru. It was the usual stuff, answering basic que My anticipation runs high as we get close t terminal, remembering the pictures I'd seen that extensive article in the Dec, 1974 Tra magazine. "My story" I say, "will be based my personal experiences--such as a normal p senger might have." That was fine, even th told Rich I'd have to include any negative which might come up. "Call 'em as you see Pete," he said, in his best Gil Stratton ma Yes, I certainly would.

And here we are at Lorton. The Saab is p in the employee lot, and I step out to watc loading operation. It's really tight here the railroad, with a siding going off into woods to facilitate shuffling the cars arou without interfering with the RF&P. Each of tracks holds four or five auto-racks, but w the movable loading ramp, the operation goe Still, Auto-Train is planning to expand thi here. Cars are driven, one right after ano into the rack cars (all ex-CN) and down a " formed by four in a line, crossing between on thin little ramps. Lots of clunking noi and crashing of tires. Autos are secured w special clamp that holds both sides of the Final call for autos is 5pm, an hour before parture. When the bottom layer is full, th table ramp moves across the concrete loadin form into position while a bell rings a war Then, the top layer is driven in. Each aut carrier hold about six full-sized cars. Wh are filled, the end doors are closed like a and #621, an old Baldwin switcher, shuffle them around.

A-T is experimenting with a triple-deck r car, and I spot it across some yard tracks also spot an open-back observation car. T is office car #1 (ex-Santa Fe parlor #3217, built 1914). It's named "Jamie" after the ter of President Garfield, who is going alo this trip. I saunter over to the passenger counter and arrival lounge. The place is a even tho quite a number of people can be se already on board. Because of the recent pr crease, those who purchased their tickets a old rate are being asked to pay the differe There is little complaint. Each person get seat or sleeper reservation number at this

The building is about the size of a new Amtrak station in, say, Cincinnati. Seats are purple vinyl and plastic.

Here, Mr. Church hands me my space assignment. I'm in car #1, space F. I walk up some steps, past the restrooms and A-T's offices and out onto the platform. A full-length dome car stands before me. An attractive hostess is directing people to their proper cars. Parts of the train are on both sides of the platform, with a longer section extending past the station and down almost to the main line switch. A hostess stands ready at each vestibule, and I'm directed into what turns out to be the last car on the train. Well--next to the last, as the observation is hooked on behind.

My gear has been taken aboard, but I linger on the platform watching last minute operations. The auxiliary engines of the ex-Santa Fe cars are roaring out a familiar sound, reminding me of departures of the EL CAPITAN from L.A. Across the platform, ex-UP domes and sleepers are bringing back memories of Los Angeles Union Station--this time for CITY sailings. Just like old times.

I enter car #1 which is AT606. Here's carpeting all along the walls and up to the ceiling. Space F is a bedroom with roomette seat and extra chair. The car is ex-SAL "Cedartown", a 5-1-4-4 built by Budd in 1955 for the SILVER METEOR. It's identical to "Manor" series cars of the Canadian Pacific. There are some differences, however. One of the roomettes has been converted into a storage area. And up at the front of the car, the sections have been ripped out and in their place is the most unusual accommodation I've seen on American rails--the "Honeymoon Suite." The original center aisle has been moved off to the side, and the space once occupied by the four sections is now a very large (bigger than Master Room dimensions) "living room". Then, a powder room is off thru a door, with an annex beyond that. The powder room is about the size of a coach ladies' lounge. The largest room is equipped with a couch that opens into a bed. And that is the sleeping arrangement. The decor is deep purple, reds, carpeting all over, mirrors, tasteful paintings, the works--all for the price of $55.00, the regular rate. Quite a set-up. All three 600-series cars have this suite, the other two being ex-SAL "Pinehurst" and "Bay Pines". Amtrak owns sister "Henderson", but uses the sections for crew quarters.

John Conley, the Service Director, comes by and hands me the consist sheet. So I am able to check out the train from the comfort of my bedroom. Leading off are three U36B locomotives, the 4010,4008 and 4000. This last is "Big Red", the first engine Auto-Train acquired, and Rich Church's favorite. Then come the auto-carrier cars. AT129 of 'em. The thirtieth car in the train is AT137, steam generator car (ex-ATSF baggage car 3932--one of the newest cars Santa Fe had--P-S 1965); Cars 301 and 302 are sleepers with 5 bdrms-2 cmpt-2drwrms (ex-UP "Ocean Sands" and "Ocean View", P-S 1956); next comes the "Purple Plum Buffet" which is cars 808 and 590. This first is one of the ex-Union Pacific Dome-Dining cars (UP8009, ACF 1955), while the other is ex-ACL "St. Petersburg", (ex-C&O #1971-originally built for the CHESSIE); 514, full-length dome coach-dorm (ex-ATSF 552, dome lounge built for the SF CHIEF-Budd 1954); 541, Nightclub car (ex-ATSF full dome lounge 512, for low-level "El Capitan" service, Budd 1953 (this car is not a high-level car and is built without the Kachina Coffee Shop); 901, 44-seat short dome coach (ex UP9001 dome lounge); AT 704 and 706, both short domes with 56 seats (ex-UP7005 & 7009). In the center of the train is AT591, a "KD", as Auto-Train personnel refer to it. It's a kitchen-dormitory (ex ACL127, ex C&O1941). This car was designed as a twin unit to be hooked to the ex-C&O1971 which is up there as AT590. Together, on THE CHESSIE, it would have been a KD-lunch counter-64-seat diner-theatre car); 703, 56-seat dome coach (ex-UP7003); 900, 44-seat dome coach (ex-UP dome-lounge-obs 9000, ACT 1955); 707, 56 seat dome coach (ex-UP7011 P/S 1958); AT 523 and 524, both full length dome-lounges (meaning lounge on bottom, coach seating on top--ex ATSF 511 and 513, Budd 1954); 570, buffet car (ex-Wabash coach built for CITY OF ST. LOUIS, ACF 1950); 806, dome-buffet (ex-UP 8007 dome-diner)--these last two cars were used together as the Lemon Tree Buffet; 205 sleeper 4-4-2 (ex-ATSF "Regal Gate"; 201 (ex-ATSF "Regal Arms"); my car, the 606-(5-1-4-4 ex SAL "Cedartown"); and office car #1. This totals 51 cars, a capacity train.

On a train of this length, with half of it freight cars, behavior characteristics should be somewhat different than with the average passenger train. Time would tell. A side view of the train would show three Flat Top Cars (FTC); a short dome; one FTC; two full domes; 3 short domes; another FTC; 3 short domes; two full domes; one FTC; short dome; and four FTC's for 22 passenger cars. That's 8 short domes, 4 full domes. Never has there been such a bumpy-looking passenger consist in my memory. The train list shows 475 passengers and 227 autos along.

Departure is scheduled for 6pm, but we don't leave until 6:15, the delay being clearance to the RF&P, plus a brake test. Passengers are swarming all over the place inside and are having a merry time, but are a little impatient to get going. My dinner seating assignment is in the Lemon Tree Buffet at 8pm, the last setting. I decide to take advantage of the time to investigate the train and make notes on the equipment, etc. I walk thru three sleepers and notice the aisles are carpeted on the floor, walls and ceiling, creating a very cozy effect. The diner (buffet) is packed, and there is a line. In fact, it's so crowded in the aisles that one can hardly squeeze his way thru. But that's typical. In fact, I haven't seen a line for supper since... uh, well, Amtrak's COAST STARLIGHT once..., but I'm reminded of the time on the NYC's Mohawk Division, as a young kid aboard the PACEMAKER, waiting with my brother for service in the twin-unit diner. I can recall standing alongside that hot kitchen and hearing clanking thru the wall, while the majestic Mohawk rolled by the window. And the 1950 NYC food was really worth the wait. Would it be as good here on Auto-Train?

As the line stretched toward a coach, I overheard comments: "Oh, there's a line for supper." A woman said, "This is ridiculous." But her husband didn't agree and was satisfied with the wait, as the line seemed to move along pretty well. Mr. Church joined me and suggested a trip to the bar. There are plenty of bar spaces built right into the train. Each full-length dome car has one below decks, and the two rebuilt ex-UP dome-lounges are so equipped. Of the six on the train, three were in operation, each with a pretty hostess doing the honors. Quite a crowd here, too.

We stood around and talked Auto-Train for a while. A man across a table said this is his fifth trip. Why? "I'm sick of looking at cars on the road. 55mph is agonizing. Auto-Train saves me time, too." A passing lady said this is her 14th trip! It was here in the lounge that I learned the story of "Shirts" Blanton, the old railroader. Injured in a railroad accident, he became paralyzed and was pensioned to his wheelchair. His home overlooks the RF&P tracks near Ashland. The company has installed a buzzer which sounds for passing trains. This gives him enough time to wheel out the door and wave to the crew. Been there for 14 years, too. Then there's the night the hotshot freight roared thru with a blazing hotbox which "Shirts" spotted. A call to the dispatcher, and the train was saved. Yes, in the fine old railroad tradition. He's still there now, waving to each passing train, and at night, signalling with his flashlight.

Suppertime arriving, Rich and I walked back to the 570 and 806 for dinner. Buffet is the proper word as each person takes a tray, cafeteria style and slides it along the serving shelf. There's a choice of 3 entrees: a fish dish (reported to be very tasty), chopped beef, and chicken. Also peas and mushrooms mixed, Lyonnaise potatoes, pie, cake or chiffon pie. The PR man introduced me to each crew member (This is Debbie, and Greg and...), and with him there, I got an extra patty of beef. The 8pm seating was the last, and it is possible to go back for seconds, provided all have eaten. The same holds true at breakfast, except the pastry goes first.

A hostess took our trays to a table in the dome, as per my request. And here we are, under the stars in a UP dome-diner once again. I recall the night on the CITY out of Ogden in 1964 when I had the $6.00 steak. Now, coffee carafes are located on each table for convenient second cups, plus all the necessaries. The food on our trays was airline-style, provided by Marriott "in-Flite services". Because it was Marriott food, it was very good. I understand there have been some passenger complaints about the buffet, they prefering sit-down service. That would be better, but food serving would probably go slower.

This car was very elegant. Leather tufted chairs, along with bright yellow tablecloths. These were not the UP originals, as theirs were pale yellow. However, the PORTLAND ROSE design wallpaper was still there. Excellent!

After supper, I poked around the train more carefully and made some observations. The predominant color over all is red. Seats, carpeting, walls,--all very Amtrakyish, with red being the most noticeable. Under soft light, the train is very intimate and cozy. Up in the ex-Santa Fe full domes, the seating arrangement remained Santa Fe. However, all were new Auto-Train seats which are very nice, good looking and comfortable. They are mostly red in color, with purple wing-back head rests. This is similar to Amtrak's new seats (Metroliner and Amfleet), but more exaggerated here. A yellow head-doily gives a bright color contrast. Fully reclining, of course, each seat also has a leg-rest in the Southern Pacific style; that is, folding out from under and angling downward to the footrest. Along with the pillow, waiting on each seat cushion for the passenger is a red woolen blanket, and a copy of the Auto-Train magazine. This is a slick airline-type mag, loaded with tips on the train itself, info on what to do and where it is--both on the train and in Florida, pictures, stories, etc.

These seats are standard throughout the train, and all dome seats are reserved and sold first. Latecomers may be seated on the lower level. As it was tonight, I hardly saw any empty spaces. But I did see plenty of lexan. Lots of windows are so equipped, but Auto-Train is not primarily designed for viewing, so I won't give too many

minus points for the lexan. A front dome window was half fogged,tho, and some lexan windows were opaque already. Between cars, carpeting is provided across the coupling plates, which I like as a safety feature. A couple of sliding doors didn't work, but it came to light later that the doors were merely on "manual" or in the "open" position. The two I spotted, I got working again. I found out that altho all doors are on "auto" at the start, some passengers make the adjustments so a large party can pass thru, then forget to change the setting back. Some cars did not have the carpeting along the wall--seems they were just pressed into service.

At 7:54pm, we arrived at Richmond and changed crews. The train was out again at 9pm, very good. Here, the SCL crews took over in the cab, and there was a difference in the ride. Because of the extreme length of the train, slack becomes a problem. Tightlock couplers and all, still there are 29 auto-racks on in front of us, as well as our 22 passenger cars. Unless the engineer is careful--as were the RF&P boys--run ins and run outs develop. And did they ever! I was walking along as easy as you please when LURCH-YANK, and I'm staggering on my feet. This occurred a few more times during the evening, so that one tends to be more careful in going thru the train. Supposedly, each "jerk" is checked out with the railroad later.

And at 9:55pm, an emergency brake application! We slid to a stop. Seems there was a piece of pulpwood on the track and we'd busted an airhose. But only about a six-minute delay in getting it fixed, as the split hose was between #1 and #2 auto-carrier. The run ins and run outs really detracted from the ride, I thought, and is a big negative factor for Auto-Train. Once, while stopped at a signal, a lady said to her husband, "Hang on tight, dear, it's liable to start up any moment." But mostly, it was smooth going, the SCL track in excellent shape.

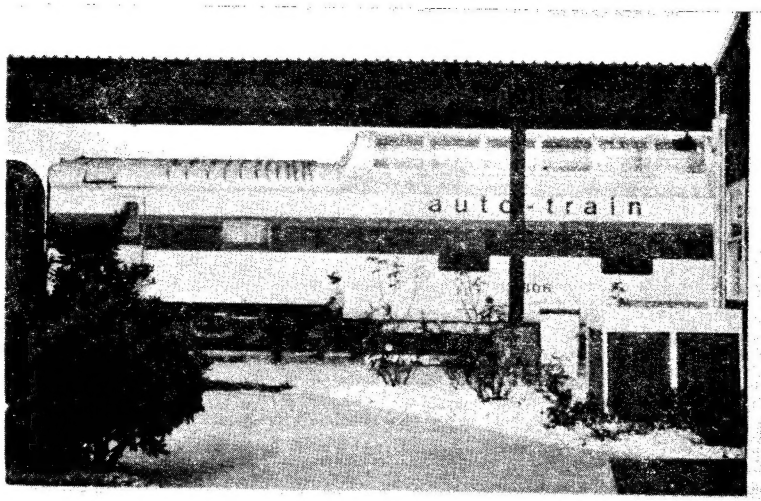
As I dropped by for a drink at one of the bars, the hostess asked if I wasn't the reporter for the magazine she's heard about? Yes, I assured her, and took the opportunity to ask some questions. How much is the crew paid and what is their schedule like? Well, they are non-union and they get $700.00 for a 10 day month. Each person makes a round trip and then is off four days. Mighty good working conditions, I think. Crew quarters are the KD for the girls, coach-dorm space for the guys and roomettes for the big shots (service director, etc.). I asked one of the hostesses later to show me the KD car dorm facilities. It was like a troopship, with close tiered bunks--three high. Crammed in a very small space were 15 bunks, one toilet and 3 wash basins. I ventured that only one toilet might be a little hard on that number. I was told that since shifts are different, not

everyone is up at once and it works out with not too much problem. But it's very confining in there with no privacy. I asked if any of the girls ever finds herself sharing a sleeper with a passenger for the night at the passenger's request? Well, this is strictly against company policy and is a definite no-no, but is has happened once or twice. Like Disney World, the youthful, wholesome image must not be tarnished with reality.

Leaving the KD car, I stopped and got a cup of coffee at one of the many large urns that are scattered throughout the train. Very convenient. Most people seemed to be enjoying themselves, and quite a few were already asleep in their seats. Back in the diners, since the last meals have been served, passengers were taking their places for a movie. There were two showings of a feature film, beginning at about 9:10pm. Both buffets show the same movie--in this case, "The Four Musketeers." A large crowd watched. Here, car #590, originally designed by Robert R Young as a diner-theatre car, was being just that, probably its first chance now with Auto-Train. During the screenings, hot dogs and pastry are available at the buffet counter (but no popcorn).

I watched for a few minutes, then walked forward to #514, the night club car, or "Starlight Lounge". This is one of the ex-CHIEF cars with lower-level bar-lounge and angled seats above. Much of the original is retained, even Kachina emblems on the bulkheads. It's been refurbished, however, with some swivel seats installed upstairs. At one end of the dome, Bob Fishwick is holding forth as the entertainer. Piano and guitar sounds fill the car, with passengers singing along with some of his songs. People would yell out requests and drunken comments--a typical night club scene. I soaked up the atmosphere sang along a bit, and watched North Carolina go by in the dark. The stop at Rocky Mount was only 4 minutes, leaving at 10:23pm.

A little later, I went back to the 606 to turn in. My bed was turned down and a copy of Auto-Train's magazine lay on the covers. I checked it out, and preparing for sleep, noticed that the soap dish contained Auto-Train soap. I grabbed a spare bar for a souvenir. Finally under the covers, I reflected for a moment or two and decided that Auto-Train has a big asset in its operations--the train crew. On board each run is a Service Director; Assistant Service Director; mechanical supervisor and his assistant; a service assistant; and 19 hosts and hostesses, 5 male and 14 female. Together, they offer competent, professional help, all with that youthful smile. Exuding sparkling charm, they are always available to assist and inform one and all. The crew's attitude is such that the passenger feels he is doing them a favor by his mere presence, so he must be treated as an honored guest. At first, I supposed they were only offering me the special treatment, as I was the one writing the story, but I made careful observation throughout the trip, and saw that all the folks were equally given the same respect and courtesy--just like the good old days of railroading. Now, this is a big advantage that Auto-Train has over Amtrak. In fact, to me, courtesy makes all the difference on a rail trip, even more important than a good meal. Altho Amtrak has many individuals who are as good as Auto-Train's (and the Amtrak General Rules of Conduct for On Board Personnel specify top-notch performance), there are many on board people at Amtrak who are lousy. Canadian trains are better that way than American, with the CP Rail personnel getting about the same rating as Auto-Train's, but those at A-T are much younger. All in all, I had a good feeling towards the Auto-Train crew, and consider this aspect alone to be the greatest part of the operation. And A-T knows this too well; their own publicity blurb says that without the friendly On Board people, Auto-Train is nothing but elegant equipment.



Pete's northbc train waits fc boarding at th Sanford terair Directly in fr is dome 606, u in conjunction with car 570 a the Lemon Tree Buffet. Photo by Peter Bretz

The promotional material slipped out of my hand and I dozed off, listening to the soft music out of my bedroom speaker (it worked!). During the night I became aware of the special effect that Auto-Train produces. This train, it should be noted, doesn't stop very often--it just keeps going. Oh, we had to big hole her last evening, and had signal stop and crew change points; but that is not much, considering the length of the trip and the briefness of those few halts. Thinking of Auto-Train as a glamorous regular passenger train, I automatically expected to wake up once or twice in the night as we waited at a station--but there are no station stops. The motion seems continuous, and I got a strange feeling, somewhat like being afloat on the railroad, is about the only way to describe it. The click of the rails with no letup creates a dreaminess or floating sensation. I was out to sea on the Seaboard Coast Line, and Auto-Train like Old Man River "just keeps rollin' along".

The next morning, I wake up hot. Not only were we in sunnier climes, but the A/C had gone out in the sleeper. Shades of Amtrak! It really seemed like a steam bath and I didn't want to put on my suit jacket, much less the tie. Getting out as soon as possible, I scurried off to the buffet car to check out breakfast. Even tho it was only about 7:30, most folks had already finished up, and the two dining areas were just partially occupied. The cafeteria offered a variety of danish pastry and rolls (the good ones gone), plus dry cereal, juices and coffee. I loaded up and went into the dome again. In a moment, a hostess brought me a carafe filled with the steaming black stuff. As I munched away, I saw that we were coming into Jacksonville--passing now the new Amtrak Station. Wow!, it sure seems to be way out in the sticks. Coming to the yards now we see a Jacksonville Terminal SW switcher sitting askew a couple of tracks over, its front trucks on the ground. "Oh's" and "ah's" from passengers who notice it, 8:10am was my notation for crew change time, a full one hour and 30 minutes late.

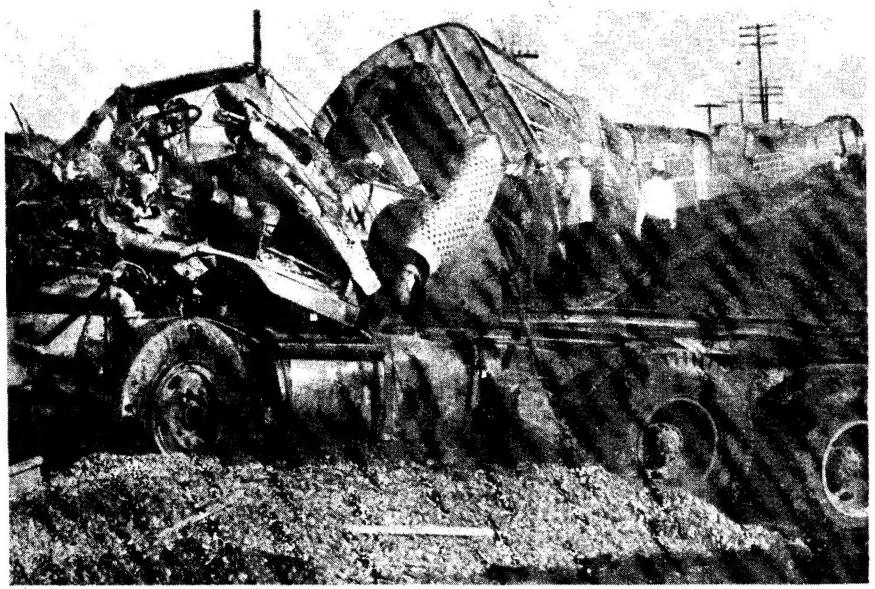
I was told by one of the service people that during the night, our trance-like floating condition had subsided as we tripped a hot-box detector plus having to go into the hole for a freight. Alright. Into the big curve at Jack-

(continued on page 12)

Mixed Train of Thoughts

A MAJOR TAKEOVER of maintenance facilities by Amtrak from Penn Central was announced in January. Besides the Chicago takeover reported last issue, Amtrak has leased from PC, pending ConRail's conveyance of the property to Amtrak when it begins operations, the following facilities on the dates given: Jan 18, Boston's South Bay Yard and South Station Maintenance Facility (241 employees); New Haven diesel car shop, motor storage unit and truck shop (252 employees); and Springfield facility (7 empl). Jan 28: Philadelphia's Penn Coach Yard, 30th St. Station, Race Street Engine House (327 empl); facility at Harrisburg (25 empl); Detroit facility (20 empl); Buffalo (48 empl); and Rensselaer (19 empl). On Feb 11, Amtrak will take over the following New York City properties: Penn Station, Sunnyside Yard, Engine House & Boiler House; Penn Station Service Platform; Newark heating plant & maintenance of way facility (869 empl). On Feb 24 the Wilmington heavy repair shop (688 workers) will be acquired. Some of these facilities do SEPTA and other commuter car work; this work will now be done under contract to Amtrak. No passenger stations have been taken over in this set of acquisitions, only maintenance stations..... AMTRAK'S DECEMBER RIDERSHIP was up 5% over Dec of 1974, but the whole recession year 1975 showed a drop of 6% in riders from the previous year. Amtrak counted 16.1 million riders in 1975. On-time performance in Dec was 73.2% overall, and 77.4% for the entire year. We do not yet have the detailed breakdown by route..... LAKE SHORE LIMITED route will see the 12.1 miles of missing track replaced, as reported here last issue. Amtrak's Paul Reistrup is asking Congress for money (he testified before the Senate at the end of January, and the House on Feb 5) to take over the trackless right-of-way between Post Road and Rensselaer, NY, as part of a group of acquisitions planned outside the Colonial Corridor, the total estimated to cost $20 million. The others are: Zoo Interlocking Philadelphia to Harrisburg (103.5 miles); Sand Bank to Hoffmans, NY (9 miles); Mill River, CT to Springfield, MA (60.8 miles); Michigan City, IN to Kalamazoo, MI (81.5 miles); and Sheldon, IN to Waldron Road, IL (26.9 miles). Added to this is a request for $85.2 million to take over the Colonial Corridor itself, and $700,000 to pay for radio train control in the Corridor..... THAT TURBO FACILITY to be built at Rensselaer (see page 18) will cost Amtrak $14.8 million. It will be 132,000 feet square, and will have 3 tracks for Turbos and 2 for conventional trains, with car-wash and support areas. Amtrak believes it will save $1.6 million by consolidating facilities at that location..... THE ECOLOGY-THREATENING Concorde supersonic transport has been given limited clearance to land at New York and Washington by an order of DOT Secretary Coleman on Feb 4..... PRESIDENT PAUL REISTRUP of Amtrak and FRA Administrator Asaph Hall joined city officials at Baltimore's Penn Station on Jan 27 for ceremonies kicking off a major fixup and refurbishing program. The 75,000 passengers handled at the station in Nov made it the 6th busiest in the Amtrak system. The federal gov't is putting up $385,000 toward the project, Reistrup is asking the Amtrak Board to approve $300,000, and the city is participating by undertaking various cleanup and landscaping projects outside the building.....

SAN FRANCISCO ZEPHYR riders in January saw very little snow in the Sierra, as California continued thru a major drought period. Here in the Bay Area, we've had summery weather most of the month and plum trees were blooming about Jan 1, a full month early (50-year residents said they'd never seen the likes of it). Flu germs were also breeding heavily in the balmy air, and almost the entire RTN production staff came down with flu in the middle of production of the last issue, delaying its mailing until Jan 21. This issue has been delayed a bit--till Feb 5 or 6. It contains news thru Feb 4. We're now off our usual 15th and 30th of the month schedule, and won't be able to get back on it until the end of March. The news in RTN is still always up to date, however..... NEW ENGLAND SUFFERED thru temperatures as low as 50 below in January (while they were 120° higher here!), and transportation was snarled. A new fierce snowstorm has just been hitting the East Coast. Major train problems have been pipes freezing up..... (please see next page)



Railroad workers survey derailed train beyond wreckage of truck which collided with it

THE SUNSET LIMITED GETS INTO A WRECK

The eastbound Amtrak SUNSET LIMITED was struck by a trailer truck carrying 35 tons of gravel at Bridge City, Texas at about 1:30pm on Jan 27. The collision occurred at a point where Texas State highway 62 crosses the SP track, 1½ miles south of I-10. The truck driver was listed in fair condition in a hospital, and 12 people aboard the train--which was carrying 51 passengers and 16 crew--received minor injuries, with 2 remaining hospitalized overnight. An eyewitness driving a truck on the highway parallel to the track said that he saw the trailer truck brake and try to swerve, but it hit one of the front train cars and derailed it and the following cars. The witness said that gravel and debris from the wreck peppered his own truck, breaking the windshield. The colliding truck driver said that warning lights at the crossing didn't come on soon enough to allow him to stop. Uninjured passengers were bused on.

The entire consist of the derailed train is visible in the above photo (photo reprinted courtesy of the Beaumont Enterprise). The consist was: engines 566 & 553; baggage 1106, hi-level coaches 9943 & 9933, dorm-lounge 3390, diner 8504 (train broke apart between these cars) sleepers 2622 "Pacific Ocean", 2210 "Indian Canoe", & 2618 "Pacific Lodge". The track was expected to be cleared and repaired by the morning of Jan 29.

THE FREEDOM TRAIN left San Juan Capistrano, CA the night of Jan 20 to leave the state for Arizona. Train was to take the SP into the adjoining state..... THE CANADIAN LRC was ridden in Canada by Amtrak's Paul Reistrup in mid-January, according to reliable rumors, and speculation is that the corporation is preparing to try out the new lightweight train on American rails. Some Canadian officials are reportedly fearful that the U.S. will order the first models off the assembly line, causing a production delay in Canadian-ordered trains when that country finally decides to buy some..... AN INTERESTING ARTICLEon the future of the passenger train appears in Railway Age (Jan 12), and concludes by quoting Amtrak's Pat King, paraphrasing Winston Churchill: "This is not the end, and not the beginning of the end, but the end of the beginning"..... WASHINGTON'S METRO SYSTEM is scheduled to open on Mar 27..... THE STATE HOUSE, train 305, hit a car at Cayuga, IL at 7:50pm Jan 19, killing four teenagers, 2 boys and 2 girls. The train had 2 engines and 7 conventional cars.....

(continued from page 9)

sonville, giving those in the domes a good look at our extreme length. More "oh's" and "ah's". I noticed, here in ex-UP 8007, that the refurbishing job that Union Pacific had done in 1967 is still retained, and still looks elegant. In fact, the entire inside of the car is the UP original. Auto-Train plans to do some changes, but nothing yet. South of Jacksonville, the track's a little rougher, some pitches and rolls. The kiddie movies begin in the buffet cars--25 minutes of cartoons and a feature on the Budweiser Clysdale Horses.

I decided to walk up to the front passenger car this morning. On the way, I overheard an Auto-Train executive on board give the following explanation to a patron as to why we had stopped in emergency last night back in Virginia: "You know those big electrical plugs that you can see above you as you pass between cars? Well, one of those came unplugged last night,--and it automatically stopped the train. That's why we halted so fast. They just plugged it back in and away we went." To be sure, my knowledge of electropnumatic brakes is limited, but even if those plugs <u>are</u> electric brake component connections, the train certainly can operate on regular automatic brakes "unplugged", so to speak. Cardinal rule: Don't give explanations if you don't know what you're talking about. That applies to this writer, too, by the way.

I got to the vestibule between car 137 and 301 --as far as I could go--and decided to take a walk back thru the train with watch in hand. How long would it take, I wondered, to traverse the whole length from first car to last? When the second hand reached twelve, I started out. My "rules" were that I would maintain a regular and steady gait, pausing naturally at doors and waiting for them to open, letting other passengers by, twisting along corridors, etc--not hurrying and not dawdling. Well, it took 13 minutes and 40 seconds to reach the vestibule of the private car. Who knows, perhaps a record?

Whiling away the remaining time to Sanford, I babbled with Auto-Train personnel again. I found out that: If the train is more than 2 hours late, each passenger gets a personally signed letter from President Garfield; The passenger cars are placed on the rear of the train for safety purposes--let the auto-carriers crash first; That Lobster Newburg was at first on the dinner menu, but its richness combined with the floating of the train motion caused various gastronomical accidents.

At last, here was are gliding into Sanford and the Auto-Train Terminal. Just outside the facilities, I spot a UP dining car sitting in the weeds with most windows broken out. It was the 4802, sister to many diners in Amtrak service, and others on the Alaska RR, Algoma Central and Heber Creeper. A-T tells me that they are not sure whether they'll use her or not. We arrived at the terminal at 10:45am, an hour and fifteen minutes late. As I stepped off the sleeper, I was met right away by Mr. George G Darsey, Assistant Vice President of Equipment at Auto-Train. He graciously offered to spend time to show me all around the facilities here. I had to make a couple of stops first, however. Just before arriving in Sanford, Mr. Church informed me that some of the Auto-Train executives were planning on traveling back to Lorton this night, making it possible and legal for me to make an unexpected return trip. A stop at the office got all the arrangements in order, but then I had to go to the Amtrak station in Sanford, Mr. Darsey driving me there in his car. It's really quite close to Auto-Train. I was able to turn in the tickets that I'd bought for the CHAMPION to St. Petersburg that afternoon, and the SILVER METEOR slumbercoach from Miami to Washington next day. No problem getting my money back, thanks to ARTS.

I noticed some L&N sleepers and an N&W coach sitting on a siding. These are to be used for parts and maybe they'll fix one up for later use on the train, Mr. Darsey explained. He is a very soft-spoken man in the Southern tradition, and sure knows his stuff. I was escorted thru some buildings, looking at the electrical shops, carpentry, car servicing and engine maintenance areas --everything. It's quite a set-up, altho crowded at present. Plans are rolling for enlarging the area, however. We both climbed up into a completely unrefurbished UP dome-diner, which was a mess inside, quite a shock after the one I'd eaten breakfast in. And, that hot Florida sun prevented us from staying in it too long. I appreciate the work that goes into getting these cars in shape.

I questioned Mr. Darsey about the lexan windows and he told me that Auto-Train has no new applications for lexan. They find it's too much of a disadvantage with the scratching and peeling. Yet, there is a new window material that is being put in: SCOTCH TINT. This, he says, doesn't scratch easily and there is no sun glare thru it. Apparently, it is just put on over the existing glass. Or, in the case of breakage, applied on top of the replacement glass.

Coming out of one of the buildings, I noticed that over at the passenger terminal, people were still waiting for their cars at noon. With 227 autos to move, I could understand why. Going thru the commisary, I've been curious about the cost of those common plastic drinking glasses one sees everywhere. Well, a case of 1000 costs Auto-Train Corporation $31.34--slightly more than 3¢ per glass. "Let's go have some lunch," Mr. Darsey suggested. That was fine with me. As we headed over to the Sheraton Hotel Buffet, we crossed over the SCL tracks below Amtrak's station. I caught a glimpse of #87, THE CHAMPION coming in ten minutes early. I would have been on that train, I considered, but it's so much more economical to be the guest of Auto-Train again.

Out of the air conditioning of the restaurant and into the heat again, tho storm clouds were brewing on the horizon. We now drove over to the wash rack, avoiding some streets that were filled with water and sand. Plenty of rain here recently, I was informed. Ah, the train is presently being washed and we can see the operation. As each car is slowly pulled thru, it gets a pre-soak, then detergent is splashed on. After that it passes a worker who's on a tower high enough to apply his brush to the front dome windows just in front of a jet stream of water. Then the brushes do their stuff, a couple of final rinse applications and the train is gleaming again. The rest of the afternoon is spent switching cars around for the north-bound run. I had really wanted to take the Lousiville train, but it rolls north only on Fridays, and this was Wednesday. Mr. Darsey is now kind enough to drive me into downtown Sanford so I could pick up a few rolls of movie film. On the way back, I noticed an animal of some kind of the road ahead. It turned out to be a big turtle! Must have been all of two feet long. He lumbered across the highway as pretty as you please. "A Terrapin," Mr. Darsey said, "very common sight." I recalled visions of Lucius Beebe sitting down to Terrapin Soup in the dining car of THE FORTY NINER.

My host had an appointment then, so I spent the remaining couple of hours until train time watching the cars drive in and people and autos being loaded. I decided to "follow" with my movie camera the arrival proceedure of a typical patron. Walking up to the greeter booth, I explained to the girl that I'd be filming her with the next car. It happened that a yellow Cadillac with Florida plates drove up, no doubt a first-time passenger. I panned my camera as the car went over to the arrival area, and the man and his wife stepped out and got organized. One of the female drivers got in and took the Caddy over to the waiting area, ready for loading. Here in Florida, the Auto-Train attendants' uniforms are understandably briefer. In my viewfinder, I followed this girl back to the carport area, noting carefully her yellow and red hotpants outfit. The zoom lens helped, too. As more people arrived, they waited in the air conditioned "station" which is really quite small, about a quarter the size of the one at Lorton. I browsed in the "Unique Boutique" next to the waiting room. It's actually a caboose and boxcar together, featuring all kinds of little knick-knacks, most with the Auto-Train logo--even an HO train set complete with U36B model engine, a rack-car, and a couple of full dome cars. I asked for an Auto-Train tie-clip, but they were not available.

A battered old Rolls Royce arrived, towed by a pickup truck. It, too, was made ready to be received up by the rack cars. Here at Sanford, the loading area is more generous than Lorton, with seven or eight cars per track. As loading began, each auto was driven into the lower deck of the carriers, across ramps separating the cars and down the tunnel to the end. I waited to film the yellow Cadillac. A little squall of rain arrived and wet things down for a few moments. Here comes "my" car. A loader drove it up to the waiting maw and I filmed the Caddy being swallowed up. When all cars are loaded, the carriers are switched onto the train without turning, thus all autos inside are carried backwards. This makes for quick unloading at the other end of the line, as they are driven out in the same order as they came in. The Rolls Royce is now pushed in by hand. All autos are secured by the clamp that swings in and holds the tires. Then, with ringing of bells as before, the moveable ramp comes into place, and the top decks of the rack cars are loaded. Only 44 autos go in this trip, but 25 rack cars are included in the train anyway. The empties are returning for more capacity loads out of Lorton. At this time of year, most traffic flows south, coming back at the end of the winter season. I was glad for the opportunity to travel northbound, as I could see what conditions would be like with an uncrowded train.

At 4pm, we're ready for passenger boarding. Autos were still being loaded tho. Passengers are directed to their proper car assignments by more girls in hotpants. Just before departure Mr. Darsey appeared to say good-by and wish me success. I certainly felt that he was most kind and considerate to show me around the place and to answer all my questions. Farewells were also said to Rich Church who had filled me in on many details, and had arranged my trip in the first place. Ourtrain eased backwards all the way down to the washrack while the rack cars were coupled on at the headend. A beautiful sunset marked our departure from Sanford a little after 6pm. As we left, I observed Mr. Darsey at the

grade-crossing of Highway 46 with stop-watch out checking to see how long the train took to clear the road.

The trip back produced some items that I'd missed on the down trip. Complete announcements are made over the public address system, which works in every car. We're informed of meal times, the existence of the night-club car, movies, late snack hours, and points of interest along the way. Couldn't ask for more. And, around 10pm the Muzak was turned off to insure deeper slumber.

The consist going back up was mainly identical with the southbound one, but there were some changes. Notably sleeper "Cedartown" with the bad A/C was missing. Behind the 25 rack cars were the following: steam-generator car 136 (ex-ATSF baggage 2933, P/S 1965); AT591, the KD car put at the front of the train rather than in the middle; 903 dome-coach (ex-UP 9003 dome-lounge ACF 1955); 708 dome-coach (ex-UP 7012 P/S 1958); AT cars 541, 514, 590, and 808, all repeats; sleepers 303 (UP "Ocean Mist" 5-2-2, P/S 1956); 301; 602 (ex-SAL "Bay Pines" 5-1-4-4); 201 and 205 from the previous day's run. Hooked on behind this consist were 806, 570, 524, 523, 707, 900, all repeats, and 703 dome coach (exUP 7003). Of the 15 cars in use, four were new additions. The seven deadhead cars plus the 25 racks gave us a 45-car train.

My space northbound was in Bedroom "B" of car 301 (exUP "Ocean Sands"). I got a full sofa this time, altho it faced backwards. I was happy to be in this car, as it was in an "Ocean" series sleeper that my wife and I had spent our honeymoon, on the "City of Everything", in 1970. Our car had been "Ocean Sunset", Auto-Train owns it, but it was on the other set of equipment.

Soon I went to one of the open bar sections and had a creme de Menthe on the rocks. I learned the names of some of the hosts and hostesses. Kirsten served me my drink, and I ran into Teri, Margi, Lee, Nancy, Howard and Gary, along with Paul Courtney and John Conley, all appearing super-nice and exuding that warm Auto-Train grin. Ooops, here's a lurch and slack runs out. A note to all passengers included in the promotional material is to be very careful while moving about the train.

I go to supper at the Purple Plum and get the full treatment. The entrees are about the same, but instead of chopped steak, roast beef slices are offered. All good-tasting. I complete my meal in the dome again, then check out the coach seats once more. Plenty of extra space this trip, some cars running empty. Passenger count is 103, about 22% of the southbound load. I sit down in a seat, and recline it. The wings around the

Peter Bretz photographed his northbound train being made up at the Sanford, FL terminal.

head rest take a little getting used to when I apply the yellow pillow, but end up feeling very comfortable. The red blanket seems warm, but it's designed primarily as a leg wrap. The leg rests fold out conveniently and I settle back, almost drifting off in the empty dome coach. I leave things as neat as possible and go to the "Starlight Lounge" (car 541). I count two full domes and three short ones on this trip, not including the deadhead stuff.

Here in the ex-Santa Fe dome lounge, I sit down at the unoccupied piano where the entertainer will hold forth later in the evening. I brazenly plunk away a few tunes in uneven rythym, and am enjoying myself. Up ahead, the engineer, for some reason is anticipating the signal he sees to change to a red eye. It blinks a change, not to red, but to yellow. Too late, however, for our intrepid eagle eye has dumped the train! It's 8:14pm. WHAAM, LURCH. CRUNCH-BLOOEY! And we are stopped. I'm almost thrown from my perch, and as I look down to the vestibule below, I see a woman sprawled on the floor. As it happened, not only did we have some people off their feet, but one hostess, Kirsten, whom I had been babbling with earlier, was tossed against a bulkhead and knocked unconscious! I found this out later. It was over very quickly, and just as quickly, I noticed train personnel all over the place, very quietly but competently checking to make sure the passengers were alright, and assisting those few who had fallen. As a result of the stop, an air hose burst in a rack car. Still, we only sat there 12 minutes before going again. "Bless me, this is nerve racking, bouncing on the rail." Kirsten was lain in a sleeper, and although she was awake, as a precaution, was taken off the train at Jacksonville, and brought to a hospital. Our time there was 9:30pm.

After supper in the Purple Plum, the movie was shown, a different bill this time. It was "The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams." I watched part of it, and nibbled some snacks. Very rough track along here, and not because of lurching or slack, but due to the bad track conditions, the coffee urn in the diner crashed to the floor and spewed its contents. But, it was cleaned up quickly. The other coffee containers scattered around the train, by the way, are secured down in their own little chrome-plated racks. I wandered around a bit more, then retired to "Ocean Sands" for a good night's sleep. Both times now, I'd missed sampling the midnight snacks that are served in the nightclub car and buffet. Supposed to be little sandwiches and such, but I can't give a report.

Next morning, I was in that Auto-Train daze again, floating along with the continuous motion. Nice and cool in my chambers, and I take my time getting dressed and organized. We cross the Appomattox River at 8:05am and are into Richmond an hour later. Breakfast is a little brighter for me as, due to the decreased load, some of the better danishes are left. I break with tradition and stay on the lower level for my meal. A couple of crumb donuts top off my eighth cup of coffee. Later, I shoot some footage out one of the vestibules as the train takes a long sweeping curve north of Richmond.

About 9:30am, the piped-in music starts up with a wow. Same effect as on the CANADIAN. The cartoon show was the same this morning, and I watched a Mr. Magoo, followed by a Roadrunner adventure. The PA was announcing points of interest, and I settled down in Bedroom B to await our arrival in Lorton. For some reason, I didn't note the exact arrival time, but I'll estimate it at 11am, still not late enough for a letter from the president. After a bit of switching, we were at the platforms and unloading. I checked in with Mr. Bill Wood, who arranged some transportation for me. I then hung around and waited for the yellow Cadillac to emerge from the rack cars, then filmed the owners getting in and driving off. One of the hostesses was asked to drive me off, and I had her stop just past the entrance so I could get a final shot of the private car, which came back up with us. That made it a 46-car train.

Driving along towards Washington, I asked to be let off at Alexandria, Virginia, at the Amtrak station. It was a cold day. I watched the JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY come and go, and hopped aboard the SILVER STAR for my trip to Baltimore. No.82 had 3 sleepers, 5 coaches, an SAL diner and a "pub" car as lounge. I sat in 4465 (ex-C&NW) and contemplated my Auto-Train experience. After making the round-trip, how do I feel Auto-Train would do in the train ratings? Well, it's certainly better than any Amtrak train, I can say that without hesitation. Amtrak and Auto-Train look similar from the inside, what with the red and purples, but so does Canadian National, and the northern boys had it first. Is A-T better than the RIO GRANDE ZEPHYR? Yes, no doubt it is, except for scenery. What about the SOUTHERN CRESCENT? That's a good train, yet Auto-Train tops it in service and comfort, but the margin is smaller.

Is there any train that comes close in North America? Yes, CP Rail's CANADIAN. Both trains have the courteous crew. Auto-Train comes up with higher marks in that respect because there are more crew and they are younger. The A-T equipment is about the same age as the CP's, but the refurbishing makes them seem more modern and pleasing. Auto-Train loses points on the food service, which altho tasty, is buffet-served and airline-arranged. There is no substitute for the regular sitdown dining car with waiters and snowy white linen, etc. Auto-Train's biggest drawback is the rough ride. Even tho only five or six times per trip did the slack run in and out, it was enough to cause anxiety over the smooth parts--at least by my observation. Two emergency brake applications on the down trip and one on the up trip are not uncommon, I'm given to understand. Auto-Train goes along for a few weeks with no problems, then a rash of dumping stops occur--almost in cycles. There are many possible solutions to this problem (i.e. getting better hoggers, rearranging the consist, etc.) yet until some adjustment can be worked out, I would consider it Auto-Train's biggest fault. If it wasn't for that aspect, I would certainly feel that Auto-Train is the best train in North America.

"OK, Pete, so you rate A-T about the same as THE CANADIAN, but is there any train in the USA that's its equal?" No. Even with the rough ride, I'm tempted to rate Auto-Train at 8 points (on RTN's 1-9 scale) where the CP train got 7½ in my book. Another question: Is it possible, other than improving the ride, to make Auto-Train better than it is now? Yes, I would say in the food area. A-T is definitely working on getting the

sit-down-and-be-served dining aspect going. That will be a big plus. "Well, can accommodations be improved?" No, not much. They are top notch within the limitations of the older equipment they have. But that's OK, ex-Santa Fe domes, etc., are fine for this run. I'd put a standard lounge car on the train additionally, but then the Nightclub car was far from full on the heavy southbound trip. Auto-Train's might and manner are in the personnel. They make the train what it is--the greatest!--in terms of service and comfort.

I looked up from my reverie as the STAR passed behind Amtrak's Headquarters at L'Enfant Plaza in Washington. Was anybody looking out the window at our passing? And, I thought, could Amtrak get an auto-train rolling? Absolutely not, I said to myself. Wisely, the two companies merging into one train is the only realistic way Amtrak could manage the concept. Could Amtrak, with equipment on hand, run as good a passenger train? Perhaps so. Improved employee moral would have to be a "must" first step--get rid of those directives that say in effect "Present policy is: you will be nice, or else". Once working conditions, pay rates, etc are established (a big order to be sure), then On-Board People would have to be willing to offer service and courtesy, et al. and take passengers' abuse. In short, accomplish what Auto-Train corporation has already accomplished with its people. Equipment-wise, use Amfleet cars only with plenty of leg room, leg and foot rests installed. Grab some UP and SP44-seat coaches, some "pub" cars, parlor domes, and dome-lounges. Insert some GN and ACL diners, add "Placid" and "Star" series sleepers, plus #2670-78. The cream. Or go the other route and use all high-level Santa Fe stuff.

These iconoclastic comments do present problems however. But examination will reveal them to be small foot-dragging ones that can be overcome. Remember, they said Auto-Train couldn't be done. The point of all this is simply that as Auto-Train has proven, getting a great train going with old equipment is possible. Perhaps all that's needed is motivation.

RIDING THE MIDWESTERN AUTO-TRAIN

by Don Porter

I rode the Louisville-Sanford Auto-Train last July 26, and would rate it overall "8" on RTN's 1-9 scale.

While probably considered a weak sister, the Midwestern Auto-Train is certainly an above-average train. Certain minor disappointments forestall an excellent rating. Customer-crew contact was minimized because on-duty personnel had to work. The food was fairly good, the buffet system great. (Hogwash to clumsy waiters and poorly prepared meals; I would prefer to pay for domes, lounges and on-train movies versus a labor-intensive deficit diner.)

The cars were in great shape, with the exception of the lead short dome, whose air conditioning failed coming north. With no washing facility at Louisville, the dome windows were dirty.

The 22-hour schedule is probably the train's greatest handicap. Most passengers are certainly not the type you usually see on a train, and 22 hours is long to them. The circular route is covered only 25 minutes faster than Amtrak when Amtrak has 75 minutes of shown sitting time, plus its other station stops. We left an hour late, arriving an hour late apparently with no effort to catch up. The hour-late arrival of the northbound run, the part-time help and the poorly designed parking lot, a long walk from the auto carriers, led to the late departure.

The train is not promoted in Lexington (200,000 people 90 miles east of Louisville) as far as I know. Most people you talk to think the train is sold out because they hear only about the Eastern runs in the media. It was lack of patronage that caused the reduction of service in the Midwest--a communication failure?

I still highly recommend the train as a travel experience. Where possible, if 4-6 people will travel together, the price becomes much more attractive.

On January 4 I observed the staging of the southbound Auto-Train from Lorton. I was truly amazed as I watched the assembly of an incredible 57-unit train which included three U36B's, three steam generator cars, 16 dome cars, three buffet cars, one kitchen dorm car, four sleepers, business car #1 (originally ATSF parlor-observation car built in 1914), 25 auto carriers, plus a non-revenue dome coach being utilized as a caboose.

The auto carriers are now at the end of such long Auto-Trains to ease car slacking noise and jerks in the passenger cars. Suspecting that this might be the longest train Auto-Train has ever hauled, I visited the corporate offices next day to inquire. Mr. Church informed me that the train that had arrived that morning (departed Sanford Jan 4) had carried 60 units, including four U36B's (one was being ferried) and A-T's prototype tri-level auto carrier. This record train carried 176 autos and 730 passengers.

--Howard Ostroff, Washington DC

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PHOTO CAPTIONS: (page 19 top) The United Aircraft TurboTrain is increasingly in the news. Amtrak is now planning to move these trains to the NY-Buffalo Empire Service and is building a new Turbine-powered train maintenance facility in Rensselaer, NY to service them and the 7 Rohr-built French-type Turboliners due for delivery starting in mid-July. The Amtrak Board approved funds for construction at its Jan 30 meeting. The Providence maintenance facility will be closed. In this photo by Fred Matthews, the southbound YANKEE CLIPPER Turbo is passing Chick Tower south of Back Bay station, Boston, as seen last September.

(Page 19 bottom) What November scenery was seen by the most Amtrak passengers from any one train? Answer: the COAST STARLIGHT scenery, as exemplified by this Santa Susana Pass view. The train was Amtrak's most heavily patronized in Nov 1975, with 26,533 riders. Photo from a 1974 color slide by Mike Jarel.

QUOTES OF THE WEEK***

"Amtrak's president has warned that President Ford's new budget will mean a drastic cutback in the passenger-train service's route structure... Amtrak would be left without service in the Boston-Washington Northeast corridor, from New York to Florida, between Seattle and Los Angeles on the West Coast, from Chicago to New Orleans, between New York and Chicago, a northern route linking Chicago and Seattle, a Chicago-Los Angeles central route and a New Orleans-Los Angeles route along the South."

--Wall Street Journal, January 23

(You might make a case for dropping that Northeast corridor and some of the others, but couldn't we keep the SOUTHWEST LIMITED, just for old times' sake?)

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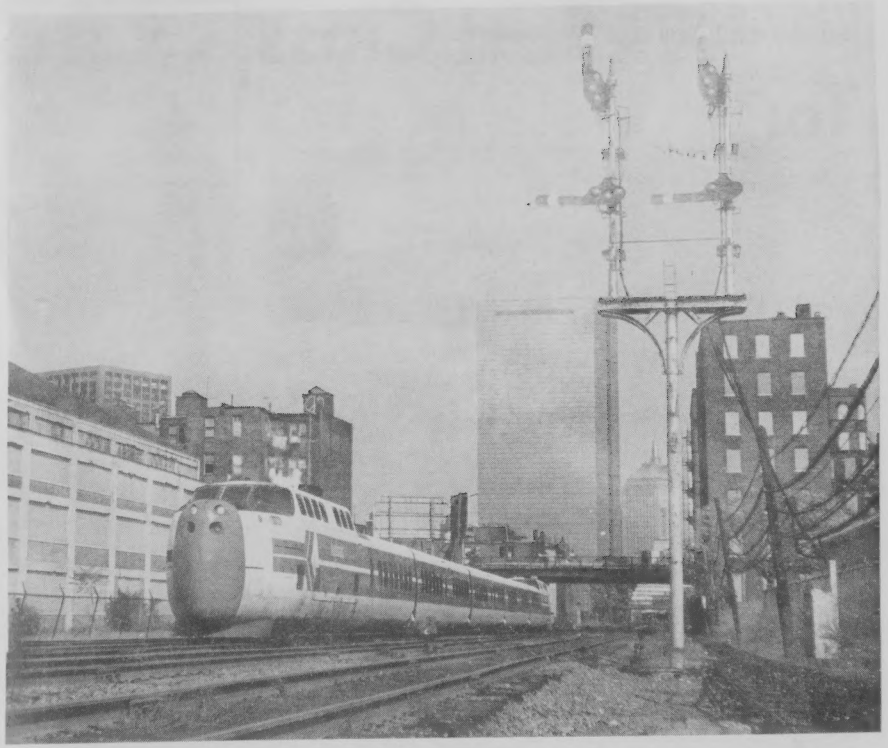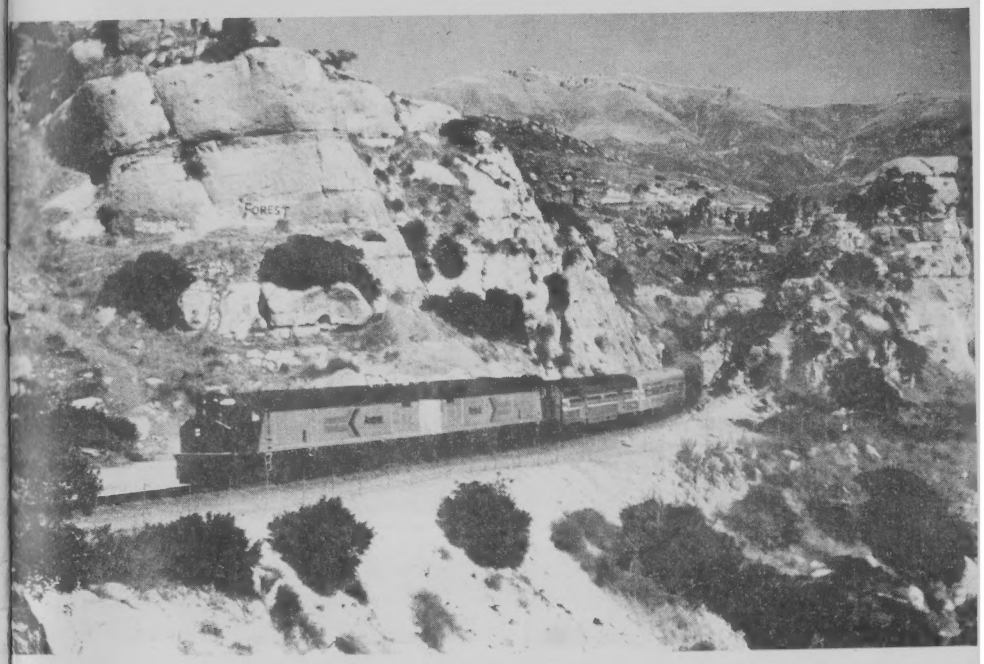
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